

Poetry: Removing the Fear Factor

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The first part of this document (p. 3 – 15) gives suggestions, ideas, and instructional advice for teaching students how to understand and write poetry. The original handout for the presentation at the Secondary Reading League’s Day of Reading are included in these pages.

The second part of the document provides samples of published poems with notes as to how they relate to the instruction and the ideas given during the presentation at the

2007 Day of Reading

Poetry as Connection

Keats said that good poetry “falls on the reader like a remembrance.” When poetry moves us, it does so because it shows us things about ourselves, our fears and desires, and shows us too that other people have felt the same things; in other words, it connects us with our humanity.

Retrieved from <http://www.paf.scriptmania.com/index.html> May 2002

Internal Reading Strategies

What good (efficient) readers do, usually automatically:

- Visualize
- Use prior knowledge to make sense of new information
- Ask questions before, during, and after reading / make predictions
- Make inferences
- Pay attention to their inner voices, which helps them
- Monitor comprehension, and when it breaks down,
 - Use strategies to repair it,
 - Separate what is important from what is not,
 - And synthesize information from reading to create new thinking.

If you do not feel familiar enough with poetry and struggle to understand it yourself:

1. Inform yourself
2. Read widely
3. Do some critical thinking / self analysis
4. Once you've been able to figure that out, what are some reasons that people could be attracted to poems?
5. Review helpful books

To help kids understand poetry:

1. Focus on the expert reader competencies
2. Share published poems done by students their ages to give them confidence
3. Begin with poems that are accessible to them and will interest them.
4. Model thinking aloud about how you come to understand a poem.
5. Read the poem another time and ask a different layer of questions:

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- a. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is s/he, and what indicates that to me?
- b. What is the occasion? How does that add to the meaning of the poem?
- c. Does the poem have a specific setting, and does that add to the meaning of the poem?
- d. Why did the author write this poem?
- e. Which words are most meaningful (and therefore well-chosen) in this poem?
- f. Why did the poet choose this particular form, and how does that contribute to my understanding of the poem?
- g. Is there anything else about this poem that makes it appealing / unappealing, meaningful, important?
- h. Is this a poem that I would want to share with someone? Who is that, and why would I want to share it with him / her?

Teaching Students to Write Poetry

1. Find out what they already know about writing poetry, what kinds they have written before, what they enjoy, what scares or bothers them about poetry: do an inventory!
2. Provide confidence from the very beginning!
3. If necessary, begin with pattern poetry or rhyming poetry and move on from there.
4. Listen to students' questions and find a way to respond
5. Include other nuances of being a poet
6. Don't expect more of them than is developmentally appropriate
7. Teach poetry writing strategies and poetic elements one at a time while sharing models of poems and how those elements are utilized in the poems.
8. Incorporate poetry writing at which they can't fail.

Topics and Starters for Poetry Writing

1. Memorable life events
2. Objects in a room, in a garden, on a porch, on the ocean, etc. or people – mental ‘snapshots’
3. ‘Thoughtshots’
4. Something you do daily that you might do differently than others
5. Begin each stanza with a repeated phrase
6. Begin with question words
7. Personal or family traditions
8. Something that happened at a holiday gathering, a meal, a game, or any other event etc. that could have seemed insignificant to others but that was important to you
9. What lives under your bed
10. “Big” ideas, such as comfort, friendship, work: how do you define them, how do others define them, does it matter if there’s a difference?
11. Find a pair of opposites (light and dark) and experiment with relationship words: “light into dark, light from darkness,” etc. Capitalize on multiple meanings of words to approach the relationships in different ways. In this example, light and dark could refer to the passing of day into night but also the description of someone’s soul.
12. Things that frighten you, why you fear those things, who else might share your fear, and what would make them less fearful
13. A physical or emotional conflict you have had or might have.

14. What is most meaningful to you right now?
15. What reflects your personality? If you could not speak, but had to explain yourself only through objects, what would they be? What would you do with them?
16. A dream you've had that warrants expressing
17. The 'unknown' (to you)
18. Monsters you have known, angels you have known
19. A single personality trait ("I wish I were not so ___" or "I'm glad I'm ___.")
20. Hope – for another, for each other, for yourself, for the future; shattered hopes
21. Powerful voices in your life
22. Perspectives:
 - a. Humans from the point of view of a race of beings who have solved the problems of human suffering and war and have been watching us...
 - b. Humans from a machine's point of view (or a flower's or animals or forest's or car's point of view)
 - c. What an inanimate object would say if it could speak (not necessarily about humans)
23. Something you would like to eliminate from (or add to) your life
24. Personifying an abstract concept
25. "You" poems; unsent letters
26. Found poems, unmagnetic poems, first line poems...

What I really want you to know about teaching poetry to kids:

1. Read poems to kids so they can hear the magic of the language.
2. Post poems and give copies of poems to kids so they can share in the physical layout of the words.
3. Ask kids to write poems, even if they are afraid of them. Approach poetry (especially the writing of it) in ways that will help alleviate that fear.
4. Be supportive in their efforts to write poems.
5. Educate yourself about poetry forms.
6. If you don't like poetry, that doesn't mean you have the right to deprive your students of it or that you don't have the responsibility to teach it to them.
7. If you don't like a certain kind of poetry, that doesn't mean you have the right to deprive your students of it or that you don't have the responsibility to teach it to them.
8. Remember what poetic license is – but only teach it to kids who already have a handle on punctuation and capitalization, etc. They think it's pretty cool to go against convention purposely.
9. Emphasize the efficiency of words in writing poetry.
10. Understand what kids at the level you are teaching are capable of doing. You can push them beyond the envelope if you like, but only carefully.
11. Provide author information, just like you would with narrative and expository writing, so they can see that poets are people, just like them.
12. Think aloud – model, model, model. And when you ask your kids to write poems, write right along with them. Share your favorite poems, too.

This is a document I give to my Elementary Reading and Language Arts methods class students. It is a compilation of what I feel are some of the most points about teaching poetry to children.

Poetry Dave's Way Condensed

1. Write two or three long, descriptive sentences (snapshot event or moment).
2. Insert slash marks at natural pauses.
3. Rewrite into lines (begin a new line at each slash mark).
4. Emphasize important words or phrases.
 - Isolate
 - Capitalize
 - Hyphenate letters
 - Run together (to indicate saying the words all together very quickly)
5. Remove punctuation, if it isn't needed.
6. Remove unnecessary words.
7. Experiment with verb tense.
8. Eliminate personal details to appeal to a wider audience.
9. Experiment with point of view.
10. Experiment with word placement.

"Dave's Way" is a method of poetry writing that I learned at a workshop. It helps poets write free-verse poems and understand where / why to put in line breaks.

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Poetry Dave's Way – Instructional Version

1. Write a densely detailed descriptive sentence of at least two or three long lines. Here's an example:

As I stood in the lift line, gazing wearily up Puma Ridge, I saw, exploding through the powder and making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid, long traverses, Carey and Scott, two kids who now outskied old dad.

2. Place a slash at each point in the sentence where you naturally pause when reading aloud.

As I stood in the lift line, / gazing wearily up Puma Ridge, / I saw, / exploding through the powder / and making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid, long traverses, / Carey and Scott, / two kids who now outskied old dad.

3. Rewrite the sentence, starting a new line after each slash.

As I stood in the lift line,
Gazing wearily up puma Ridge,
I saw,
Exploding through the powder
And making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid, long
traverses,
Carey and Scott,
Two kids who now outskied old dad.

4. What is your favorite word or phrase in your sentence? Mine in my sentence is "exploding." I want to give it emphasis by placing the word on a line by itself.

As I stood in the lift line,
Gazing wearily up puma Ridge,
I saw,
Exploding
through the powder
And making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid, long
traverses,
Carey and Scott,
Two kids who now outskied old dad.

There are other ways to emphasize a favorite word, such as writing it in capital letters or with dashes or spaces between letters.

5. Remove the punctuation that comes at the end of each line. The break in the line will function as the commas did, to indicate brief pauses.

6.

As I stood in the lift line
Gazing wearily up puma Ridge
I saw
Exploding
through the powder
And making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid long
traverses
Carey and Scott
Two kids who now outskied old dad.

7. As much as I love them, I don't think "Carey and Scott" will stay in this piece much longer. If I want this piece to have a wider audience than my family, I must make the contrast between the weary father, who taught his children to ski, and his powerful children, who can now teach him a think or two, more universal. I'm also going to change "I" to "he" for the same reason. Speaking of contrast, why not try "wearily" at the end of the line and "old dad" on a line by itself?

As I stood in the lift line
Gazing wearily up puma Ridge
He saw
Exploding
through the powder
And making figure-eights as they crisscrossed their fluid long
traverses
Two kids who now outskied old dad.

8. I decide to eliminate anything personal and all but the most important ideas and change the verb tense to the present to make the impact of the poem more immediate:

Standing in the lift line
gazing wearily
up puma Ridge
he sees
Exploding
through the powder
making figure-eights as they traverse
two kids who now outski
old dad.

Remember, writing, especially writing poetry, is about making choices. Varying line length, positioning words for impact, and using fewer words while making sure they are the most important words are techniques you can use not only to write poetry, but also to improve your prose writing.

Metaphor: Greek

meta" beyond, across, over) + "phoreo" (to carry, bring, bear)

Greek moving companies: METAPHORA

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech in which the qualities of one thing are carried over to another thing, the way furniture from one house is moved by truck to another house.

A **metaphor** contains two parts: an **X** and a **Y**.

Metaphors are used to describe. They may describe concrete OR abstract items.

The item used to create a **metaphor** must bring to mind something that represents the **quality** you are trying to get across. Therefore you should think about **how those two things are alike**, and that item must commonly express the quality to most people. Sometimes the quality is stated, but usually, with metaphors, it is implied instead.

Example: Most people make a connection between rainy, gray days, and dreary feelings. Therefore you could create a metaphor using rain: "The rain is my sadness" or "Sadness rains on my heart."

"Dandelions are summer's snowflakes."

"Love is a door anyone can open."

"Homework is the only anchovy on the pizza of the weekend."

"The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas."
from "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes

This is a one-page summary that gets at the concept of 'metaphor' from different angles. It can be used as instructional material or as handy reminders for kids. I have made these summary pages for concepts in writing, poetry, grammar, and literature.

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You Poems

From p. 14, *Gonna Bake me a Rainbow Poem*, by Peter Sears

What do you think is the most personal kind of writing? Is it a diary? A journal? Is it a letter? Do you think that poetry is a personal form of writing? Poetry can, I think, convey a feeling of intimacy. One way to encourage this feeling is to write the poem to someone. The poet is the speaker, the “I,” and the person being addressed is the “you.” I like to call poems set up in this way “you” poems.

Sunwashed Windows

As I look out the window
And sunlight falls delicately upon my face,
Embracing me with its warmth,
I think about you,
And everything that’s happened between us
In such a short period of time,
And wonder, are you looking out the window
Thinking of me?

Hilwatha Stephens

Hilwatha Stephens wrote this poem in 1982, while in the ninth grade at Marietta High School in Marietta, Georgia. This poem could be sent as a letter, couldn't it? It is personal and tender.

Colours

When your face
Appeared over my crumpled life
At first I understood
Only the poverty of what I have
Then its particular light
On woods, on rivers, on the seas,
Became my beginning in the coloured world
In which I had not yet had my beginning.
I am so frightened, I am so frightened,
Of this unexpected sunrise finishing.
I don't fight it, my love is this fear.
I nourish it who can nourish nothing,
Love's slipshod watchman.
Fear hems me in.
I am conscious that these minutes are short
And that the colours in my eyes will vanish
When your face sets.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko

I included this poem because it is an example of a "you" poem. It also contains symbolism and metaphor.

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Frozen

Temperature has nothing to do
With degrees,
With the weather,
With outside meteorological forces,
- only with what you do
to my soul,
which is where I feel weather
the most.

Tonight I am stone-cold.

Cindy Wilson, 1994

This is an example of a “you” poem. It is also an example of a teacher writing alongside her students, which makes most students more likely to engage in the process.

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Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work---
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work.

Carl Sandburg

I included this poem because it is an example of the personification of a concrete object.

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Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State
and I hunched in its belly til my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrett

This poem is a good example of how social studies and literature can be connected. It is also a good poem to use for modeling the thinking-through of a poem and using reading strategies to understand the content.

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I, TOO by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed - -

I, too, am America.

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I, TOO Style Imitation

I, too, _____.

I am the _____(er) _____.

They _____

When _____,

But I _____,

And _____,

And grow _____.

Tomorrow,

I'll be _____

When _____.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

" _____,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how _____ I am

And be ashamed - -

I, too, am _____.

["I,Too"](#) and the template are included to demonstrate how some poems lend themselves to style imitations.

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Grammar Poetry

_____ (Article +
adjective + subject)

_____ (verb - you may need to change the ending)

_____ (Prepositional phrase)

_____ (Article
or possessive pronoun + subject)

_____ (verb phrase – you may need to change the helping verb)

_____ (preposit
ional phrase with adjective)

The 'grammar poetry' template utilizes a pattern of poetry writing at which students cannot fail because they pick the words or phrases at random out of envelopes containing the words or phrases on small slips of paper. The resulting poems 'sound' like poems because they create two complete sentences and are creative. Eventually students may choose to use this pattern to write poems that do make sense.

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Meeting new students
Inquisitive about their minds
Sometimes silly
Satisfied with teaching

Writing her dissertation
Intensely
Looking forward to Chicago
Shaking in her boots
Openly
Nervous

September, 1998

This is an example of an acrostic poem, one that students may write about themselves or may write about a concept in a content area, such as 'amoeba' or 'communism,' where each word or phrase begins with a letter in the word and tells something about the person or concept.

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Emily Dickinson Excerpts

712

Because I could not stop for Death---
He kindly stopped for me---
The Carriage held but just Ourselves---
And Immortality.

We slowly drove --- He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility---

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I heard a Fly buzz --- when I died ---
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air---
Between the Heaves of Storm---

The Eyes around --- had wrung them dry---
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset---when the Kind
Be witnessed --- in the Room ---

Dickenson's poems can illustrate how rhythm is used in poetry. Most of her work can be sung to the tune of "The Wabash Cannonball," "Pop Goes the Weasel," the theme song from "Gilligan's Island," or "America the Beautiful."

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Excerpted from “Hiawatha’s Childhood,” from *The Song of Hiawatha*

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The whole of Longfellow’s work on Hiawatha can be spoken in rhythm to what most people recognize at traditional Native American drum beats.

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death;
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke

"My Papa's Waltz" was written in three-four (waltz) time. This is an example of how rhythm can add to or reflect the meaning of a poem.

Haiku

A haiku is a three-line poem, of Japanese origin, containing seventeen syllables. There are five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five syllables in the third line. The subject of a haiku is usually something in nature. Since there can be very few words in a haiku, each word must convey very specific meaning. The author of a haiku must be very efficient with his or her choice of words, not wasting syllables on unnecessary words.

A bitter morning:
Sparrows sitting together
Without any necks.

(J.W. Hackett)

The lightning flashes!
And slashing through the darkness,
A night heron's screech.

(Matsuo Basho)

I must go begging
for water.....morning glories
have captured my well.

(Chiyo)

The following haiku are from Jack Prelutzky's book, *If Not For The Cat*

Boneless, translucent,
We undulate, undulate,
Gelatinously.

Activity ideas:

After clearing up definitions of the words but before showing the pictures in the book, have students draw a picture representing what they think the jellyfish looks like when it's undulating gelatinously.

Have students 'undulate gelatinously' around the room. (Especially effective if accompanied by a cd of ocean sounds!)

These two haiku illustrate some of the different concepts you can teach while you are teaching poetry.

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- Comment [CW1]:** Adding the suffix "less" makes a noun into an adjective.
- Comment [CW2]:** Combining forms / roots: "trans" meaning 'across' and "lucent" meaning light. Compare to "transparent" and _____.
- Comment [CW3]:** Why did the author choose to repeat this word? Could it have something to do with its meaning? Also, the ending '-ate' typically means a word is a verb.
- Comment [CW4]:** The ending "-ly" often indicates an adverb. What is the function of an adverb in a sentence? What words can it describe? What word does it describe here? What other word do you recognize in it? How does that help you know what it means? (Kids might not know what 'gelatin' is.)
- Comment [CW5]:** How does each word in this poem fit with your understanding of what a jellyfish looks like? What does this mean to you in terms of how important every word is in a poem?

From nests in the clouds
We survey our dominion
With telescope eyes.

Comment [CW6]: What do prepositional phrases tell us about the things they describe?

Comment [CW7]: What does a surveyor do for a living? How does this add to your understanding of the poem?

Comment [CW8]: From the rest of the poem and what you know about eagles, what do you think “dominion” means? What other words sound like it? (Dominate, dominant, kingdom)

Comment [CW9]: Often, when you put a noun in front of another noun, the first one turns into an adjective.

Comment [CW10]: What kind of eyesight do you think the eagle has from this description? Why is that important to eagles?

Activity ideas:

Find a web site or book with interesting facts about eagles, including something about their vision, to share with the class. Imagine some of the things eagles might see with their “telescope” eyes.”

Bibliography of Helpful Books

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